



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Capt. Richard Low, right, talking with members of the Iraqi National Police recently. Two Iraqi officers, from different checkpoints in Baghdad, discovered that their radios did not have matching frequencies.

Stand or Fall in Baghdad: Capital Is Key

By [MICHAEL R. GORDON](#)

BAGHDAD, Oct. 22 — After three years of trying to thwart a potent insurgency and tamp down the deadly violence in [Iraq](#), the American military is playing its last hand: the Baghdad security plan.

The plan will be tweaked, adjusted and modified in the weeks ahead, as American commanders try to reverse the dismaying increase in murders, drive-by shootings and bombings.

But military commanders here see no plausible alternative to their bedrock strategy to clear violence-ridden neighborhoods of militias, insurgents and arms caches, hold them with Iraqi and American security forces, and then try to win over the population with reconstruction projects, underwritten mainly by the Iraqi government. There is no fall-back plan that the generals are holding in their hip pocket. This is it.

The Iraqi capital, as the generals like to say, is the center of gravity for the larger American mission in Iraq. Their assessment is that if Baghdad is overwhelmed by sectarian strife, the cause of fostering a more stable Iraq will be lost. Conversely, if Baghdad can be improved, the effects will eventually be felt elsewhere in Iraq. In invading Iraq, American forces started from outside the country and fought their way in. The current strategy is essentially to work from the inside out.

“As Baghdad goes, so goes Iraq,” observed Lt. Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, who commands American forces throughout Iraq.

Many ideas — new and not so new — are being discussed in Washington, like a sectarian division of Iraq (which the current government and many Iraqis oppose); and starting talks with Iraq’s neighbor, Iran (which the Iraqi government is already doing, but the United States is not). Some of these ideas look appealing simply because they have not been put to the test.

However the broader strategy may be amended, nothing can work if Baghdad becomes a war-torn Beirut. Baghdad security may not be a sufficient condition for a more stable Iraq, but it is a necessary condition for any alternative plan that does not simply abandon the Iraqis to their fate.

It is hard to see how any Iraq plan can work if the capital’s citizens cannot be protected.

The current operation is called Together Forward II, the second phase of an effort begun in July to reduce violence in Baghdad. The name reflects the core assumption that the Iraqi government is to be an equal partner in regaining control of its capital. Necessarily, the security plan requires an integrated political and military approach, since its goal is not to vanquish an enemy on a foreign battlefield but to bring order to a militia-and-insurgent-plagued city.

But the early returns have raised searching questions as to whether the government of Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) is truly prepared to tackle the mission.

“It is a decisive period,” said Maj. Gen. J. D. Thurman, the commander of the Fourth Infantry Division and the senior commander of the American forces in Baghdad.

“They either seize the opportunity or they don’t,” he said. “If they don’t, then our government is going to have to readjust what we are going to do, and that is not my call.”

Since it would take several months to secure and begin reconstruction in the dozen or so strife-ridden neighborhoods that are the focus of the plan, American commanders said the viability of the strategy could not be properly assessed before the year’s end. So far, however, the plan has been short on resources as well as results. The Iraqi Defense Ministry has supplied only two of the six Iraqi Army battalions that General Thurman has requested.

That is not just a question of numbers. Some American military officers say they believe the Iraqi Army may be more effective than the Iraq police, and more trusted by local citizens. Yet several Iraqi battalions have deserted rather than follow orders to go to Baghdad, according to American military officials. In the case of these units, summoning them to the Iraqi capital was tantamount to demobilizing them.

Some of the Iraqi police forces the Americans must work with have been infiltrated by militias. One Iraqi National Police unit has already been withdrawn from the streets and a training program has been instituted to improve the others. The Americans are carefully monitoring a number of police stations that they say have made common cause with some of the militias and intend to report them to the Iraqi government.

The original concept behind the plan was that American forces were to hold cleared areas for 60 to 90 days, during which the process of economic reconstruction would begin. Then American forces would turn

the sectors over to Iraqi police and army units, freeing up American troops to tackle security challenges elsewhere in the city. Without sufficient Iraqi forces, however, this process has been hampered and it has been more difficult to prevent militias and insurgents from sneaking back into cleared areas.

“What takes the combat power is the holding piece,” said General Thurman. “We can do the clearing. But once you clear if you don’t leave somebody in there and build civil capacity in there then it is the old mud-hole approach. You know the water runs out of the mud hole when you drive through the mud hole and then it runs back in it.”

Delays in Iraqi government programs to improve electrical, sewage, water and health facilities has also hampered the effort. It had been expected that such Iraqi programs would begin before Ramadan, the monthlong holiday that is about to end. But the programs are now projected to start in November. In the absence of large-scale Iraqi programs, the Americans have sponsored some smaller efforts to improve sanitation and repair services, programs that have generated jobs and helped lower the unemployment rate in the city.

While the sectarian violence would be far worse if not for the American efforts, the number of murders in the Baghdad area has not decreased as hoped. Fifty-two bodies were found in General Thurman’s sector, which includes Baghdad and large swaths of territory north and south of the city, during the first week of August, when the security operations began. During the week that ended Oct. 14, the body count was 176. For the week that ended Oct. 21, the body count was 143, a noteworthy decline but still more than at the start of the operation.

There are a number of ideas being discussed in private to fix the plan. Americans still hope to receive additional Iraqi Army forces next month. They also hope to persuade the Iraqi government to purge police stations infiltrated by militias. Iraqi deployment areas may also be realigned.

American forces have already shifted some forces to new high-violence sectors and may make further adjustments. Shrinking the military zone controlled by the American Baghdad-based division, which now extends south to the cities of Najaf and Karbala, has also been discussed as a way to increase the density of American troops in the capital.

Erecting more barricades to section off parts of the city has been proposed by some officers. So has legitimizing some neighborhood watch organizations. That idea cuts against the policy to abolish militias but has been advocated by some military officials as a useful expedient.

Keeping the Army's Fourth Division in place in Baghdad instead of rotating it home when it is to be replaced by the First Cavalry Division would substantially increase the number of American troops in the city. But there have been no indications that such an idea is under serious consideration.

In the final analysis, American officers say, much is in Iraqi hands. The American military is looking toward the Maliki government to finally disband the militias and reintegrate them into Iraqi society. It is not clear if the Iraqi government will follow through on such a step since some senior Iraqi officials have said the militias cannot be broken up until the Sunni-based insurgency is brought to heel.

American officials also say that the Iraqi government needs to more strictly enforce bans on the possession of illicit weapons and accelerate its reconstruction and job creation programs.

"Part of our problem is that we want this more than they do," General Thurman said, alluding to the effort to get the Iraqis to put aside sectarian differences and build a unified Iraq. "We need to get people to stop worrying about self and start worrying about Iraq. And that is going to take national unity."

"Until we get that settled I think we are going to struggle," he added.

"IRONHORSE!"

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